

*A Short Story
of*

Joseph E. Cosley

*Trapper, Guide, Soldier
and Student*



1963.

A Monument to Love

A cottonwood tree with a heart carved deep into its bark is a monument to an Indian half-breed and his love for a "rich widow" in the Cardston area of southwestern Alberta. Behind the bark is a diamond ring, imbedded by the rejected suitor. The ring, in a tree somewhere in the Belly River district on the Montana side of Waterton-Glacier International Park, is recalled in correspondence to 73-year-old Mrs. Margaret Ivens, a Cardston pioneer.

The life of Joseph E. Cosley, half-breed, college graduate and war hero, is chronicled in letters to his friend covering the years from 1924 to 1943. One letter tells of the ring and its approximate location, 20 miles from an old ranger station at Cosley Lake, named for the trapper.

Mr. Cosley was born on an Indian reserve near Blind River, Ont. His father was a French-Canadian trapper, his mother a Cree. He came west as a young man and trapped and scouted before he enlisted in the army at the outbreak of the First World War. Fred Burton, publisher and editor of the Cardston News, recalls Mr. Cosley was credited with killing more than 60 of the enemy.

He returned to the Cardston area after the armistice and in the summer of 1924 he fell in love with Elizabeth Webster, whom Mr. Cosley refers to as "the rich widow." When his proposal was rejected, he left the area and began trapping in the Belly River district, then moved to northern Alberta. Mr. Cosley wore earrings and an early photograph shows a sensitive, handsome face, circled by a red bandana.

He carried a typewriter in his travels and it recorded his wanderings in letter to Mrs. Ivens until 1943. There was a silence, and she learned his body had been found in a lonely cabin in northern Alberta, far from the Belly River valley.

The Meeting of Kootenai Brown

By JOSEPH C. COSLEY



The first time I ever saw Kootenai Brown was in the latter part of October, 1894. The meeting took place at his log shack on the bank of Little Kootenay, now known as Waterton River.

Reckoning up the many years which came apace and unerringly flitted by with incredible swiftness since that memorable day, can easily be comported by decades on four fingers. To me, the long period, which sounds so infinitely remote, seemed but a short time.

Perhaps the years would have been less had not the cruel storm happened at this time. In the event of accomplishing our assessment work in the Broken Arm country, we would undoubtedly, have returned by the route we had come and thus averted the opportunity of meeting that noteworthy character.

The first of September, Porcupine Jim and I left Blackfoot for the Broken Army country with the view of doing some excavation work on five claims owned by Joe Kipp and others. This string of claims ran diagonally across Flat-top, which formed the watershed of two mighty rivers in the continent. The altitude at its highest point was more than 6,000 feet; thickly wooded in places, fearfully wild in its nature and abundance of game — grizzly bears and mountain lions were the principal wanderers in its thickets that extended along the base of craggy precipices.

Some of our horses had bells by which we could make sure in what direction they were feeding in case we needed them hastily. On several occasions, during the night and quite often in day-time, these horses took alarm and the bells would jingle in great liveliness and the ground resounded with their thundering hooves, making swiftly for camp. Many times on these warnings we were obliged to construct large campfires

on some nights to frighten away the wild beasts and ensure safety to our timid horses.

As time wore on and September slipped away almost unbeknown to us, and October, 1894, came with its Indian Summer, bright and fair, the completion of the assessment was nearing the end. During those warm days which followed, migratory birds appeared. What delightful companionship; the trees were filled with chirping sounds. In this jumble of noises were familiar songs of robins, thrushes and warblers that serenaded each other in various parts of the forest with such sweetness that we, in temporary oblivion, imagined Spring had come. Indeed, condition of things everywhere gave the appearance of spring, for when we cast a glance upon open ground, or natural avenues and beautiful glades we saw plants in full bloom. The hazy air was impregnated with pleasing odors. And as we passed from one meadow to another the high scented air changed to different fragrancy exhaled from other variety of sweet flowers. The foliage also was conspicuously colored with rich, deep green produced by the warmth of mellow sunlight and the healthy grasses took on a new life.

Among the cracks in rocky places where the soil had chanced to rest huckleberry bushes grew rank with an abundance of fruit, large and matured. The horses were exceptionally fond of the berries and were continually in patches in spite of being routed at times by bruin when the shades of night approached. We also had ample supply and a fresh batch each evening upon our return to camp.

We certainly enjoyed our new paradise upon which the great sun poured down its radiant beams through a clear sky. While the Indian Summer continued with splendor, the "taller heads" seemed to flutter in the blue in sheer gratitude and enjoyment. The mountain chickadees sang their two-note familiar ditty around us to give us the sign that they were delightfully contented with the progress of a glorious summer. These birds usually sing only in the spring-time and are not heard during the summer, and I was surprised to hear them at this season with the "Spring Soon!" the first high, the last low, as it came from the tree tops. It could not have been the older ones which uttered "Spring Soon", for they knew too well that spring wasn't coming now, so I could only attribute this untimely strain to their progenies of trivial mind who knew no better. Perhaps it was likewise with other young birds that came and went, only to be replaced by others from the north.

Then, one day while out replacing corner stakes to the claims, fire broke out and razed our cabin to ashes. Everything was consumed save the saddles and pack outfits which were under a spruce some distance away. Deprived of blankets and coats and with neither shelter nor food, we were turned adrift in the woods and obliged to pick berries to satisfy our hunger. That night a fire was built and we sat before it until morning. What a sad misfortune! I no longer held an especially agreeable interest in the climatic condition or the beauty which it imparted to the verdant land dense, deep-black, forest canyons. In an instant a new phase of unpleasant aspect pervaded my mind as a spontaneous growth inflicts one's soul. I felt a pungent desire to leave at once. Porcupine Jim groaned, twisted about, his head hung low. Deep thoughts surged into his mind, for the valuables, including cash, were all lost. His massive body became attenuated by the effect of loss and by that which followed. The horses, too, seemed to comprehend; they came around, looking with surprise at the ruins, and sniffed about.

At daybreak we left for McDonald Lake for supplies, and returned immediately, only four days being spent on the trip. Our chief motive for haste was due to the fact that development work wasn't begun yet upon one of our claims. We completed this assessment requirement within ten days — just as the snow storm set in with threatening foreboding.

Under shelter of spruce trees, by the campfire we debated as to what prospect we might conceive more suitable for the route we should take out of the mountains. Porcupine proposed that we should return to Blackfoot by the route over Ahern Pass. He seemed to have no perceiving qualities, for he could see in his mind only a clean, bare trail, with no dangerous obstacles in the way, extending to the other side of the mountains. I, on the other hand, persisted strenuously upon my view and took extra pains to make him see what he, heretofore, could not perceive. I knew by careful observation of Ahern Pass and its glacier that I had made previous to our arrival here that it would be a dangerous undertaking, especially so now that much deeper snow had fallen there, covering the numerous deep crevasses into which we would deliberately walk to our doom.

The snow was driven hissing through the trees and intense cold came with the change. Then at midnight the wind ceased, but the fall of snow continued. By morning the depth

had reached more than three feet on the level — and still it fell, but lightly, until it finally stopped by nine o'clock. Although the wind had abated near the surface, a strong gale was indicated above by the swift movement of white clouds racing over the summit and sometimes as low as the tree tops.

We anticipated another issue of snow, sooner or later, from the mustering of a powerful storm for action and, reviewing the situation seriously, we eventually decided to leave immediately.

Porcupine rounded up the horses, packed them, and, with myself in the lead, headed northward, taking down an unknown canyon for better or for worse. Great difficulties were encountered at frequent intervals and hindered our progress most obstinately, no matter in what direction we went. The cause of these predicaments was due greatly to the obscurity of vision in the densely snow-laden forest — we could not see any distance at all. At intervals a swishing sound was clearly audible — threatening white vapor breaking through the trees with tremendous energy. This, too, had much to do with concealing our line of sight. We had to stand still at times in order to let great banks of cumulous clouds, eminently densified, rise or pass over us that we might see for a little distance where to go.

From the clouds bursting over us the smell of carbonate oxygen came to our noses, offensive and disgusting, and it was necessary to keep from choking to place a wet handkerchief over the mouth and nose.

We knew there was a trail that led down somewhere, but we were not in shape to look for it, consequently we were obliged to push our way in any manner feasible for a speedy descent. High bluffs and precipices were frequently encountered, but these were not so difficult getting around as the jumble of windfall, or the deep canyons with mighty jump-offs extending either way. Hardship of the worst kinds that gave us excruciating pains in the head! Yet we worked hard to extricate ourselves. The horses suffered abominably, though none were injured in spite of a flop and roll down a precipice, or a header, preceded by a slip on some craggy ledge. The snow was responsible for this: it acted as cushion under their prostrated forms, thereby sustaining them and allowing but very little harm.

Finally we got down from the side of that high bluff. Thank goodness, we could see some distance ahead, regardless of snow-covered trees that looked like white ghosts. In the course of an hour I observed, incidentally, an old blaze on the bole of one of those ghost-like figures, then another loomed up further ahead. The ardent feeling of appreciation that welled up in me upon the discovery of those signs made me at once realize that we had come on the old trail. Though we saw no depression in the snow, I was positive it laid beneath for the blazes indicated a trail, and from now on we kept a sharp look for fear of losing a single one.

The condition down on the heavy wooded flat over which we now travelled was a gratifying elysium compared with that terror above. As we pressed forward the trees shook immense columns of snow upon us and our packs. I noticed the dampened snow was less than three feet in depth here. Perhaps farther down, when we would reach an altitude of less than 3,000 feet, bare ground would probably be encountered, and we would have safer and freer progress clean down to the prairie.

We now hastened our pace in order to obtain a suitable camping place before evening. But instead of having to search for this, we accidentally, or through the virtue of good luck, came upon a trapper's shack on the edge of a meadow. The occupants had evidently left early in the day as shown by numerous horse tracks and a well broken trail leading down.

Excessive joy in our patent need came to our long desponding spirits and we sprang to the packs without delay and with vigor, piled them up in the cabin, turned the horses loose in the meadow. It was about time that such a haven of blessedness opened in our existence, for we were drenched to the skin, copiously drenched, and shivered till our teeth chattered with the cold. A hasty fire was made and everything commenced to hum with prospect of a comfortable heated room.

On investigation of the things placed so neatly within, I discovered that a woman had been one of the occupants of the cabin. It was evident a trapper had built it and stocked it, for there were traps, snares, shotgun and a goodly supply of provisions. On the table was a note written in a clear hand: To anyone coming this way, may use our cabin to his convenience for the night. John G. Brown." At the time we knew not the man, but afterwards we learned he was Kootenai Brown

who occupied a trapping district on the little Kootenay up to the summit which we had just left. His cabin showed signs of long usage — five years at least.

An abundance of reading matter covered the shelves — occupation for the evenings or in stormy weather. Undoubtedly, he was a great reader of history and the like, as well as the modern story. Stationery of the choicest kind was laid neatly on another shelf, together with pens, ink and lead pencils. He was evidently a writer of manuscripts. A new diary, just begun, lay in a convenient receptacle.

With the shades of night, and just as we sat down for supper, a violent disturbance of the atmosphere attended by wind and snow swooped down upon our domain from the west. We did not know at what time the storm subsided, for we lost our senses shortly after closing our eyes in deep slumber, and it wasn't until the break of day that we returned to consciousness of our surroundings again. The scream of wild geese and ducks directly over the cabin roof and above the tree tops had aroused us with a start.

Porcupine Jim got up and went out to look for the horses while I prepared breakfast. On entering the shack some time later, Porcupine's face, I noticed, was radiating a broad smile, mingled lightly with excitement. He said he had found all the horses on the grassy shore of a small lake near by that obtained many geese and all kinds of ducks.

"We'll go get a few," said Porcupine Jim, anxiously.

With that in view, we partook of a hasty meal and then went out, carrying a rifle and shotgun. As we approached the lake, we separated some distance apart until we were near the shore line and under cover. From the covert of a snow-laden tree, I immediately opened fire on a flock by the shore. Porcupine brought down ten geese with the automatic, and I a dozen green heads and spoonbills. Those that fell in the shallow lake were secured by wading after them on horseback.

The clouds now thinned out considerably, the wind fell, and a promise of fair weather was in evidence. We rounded up our horses and straightaway lined them on the trail for an early start on the fourteen miles to Cameron Falls. On the way we had a chance to see the lake then known as Little Kootenay, and from the heights over which the trail wound its way we saw the lower lake and the broad prairies beyond.

Arriving at the base of the falls, we pitched our tent under a clump of trees on a cosy, snowless spot. Porcupine Jim took some hooks from his sack and went fishing in the pool just below.

A hot breath of chinook now swept gently over the land, bringing into existence many little streams from melting snow. The condition of the weather appeared to have reverted to a state of kindliness, yet the sky showed not its blue, but gave promise for the following day.

In the folds of profound silence I sat, enjoying the warmth of the lazy air. After a time I arose, took my rifle and strolled out of camp. There was a slight odor of perfume from exposed buttercups, which were badly crushed, but yet seemed to live for a purpose — I suppose to linger awhile to exude from their hearts sweet odor and waft it, with other dying blossoms, on the air.

I wandered to the open flat where on so many homes have since been erected, the pleasant site of handsome structures created by mankind. This day, however, nothing of the sort greeted my eyes, save the great beauty of nature adorning the peaceful glades, the silent flat with its verdant timbers unmarred by axe, and the splendid shore lines on which the cold waters rise and fall so lightly in their wash. When the sun topped the jagged peaks to the west at eventide, elk and moose and deer came down from the pine forests which look like a velvet mantle on the uplands and drank the clear waters and rested on the green grassy flats around, for this place was far from the leather-scented trail of man. It was here that Kootenai came to fish, hunt and trap.

It was an ideal beauty spot, up at the Little Kootenay Lakes, long before the coming of civilization. And as I stood, where now stands a magnificent hotel known to all comers to this bit of paradise of Southern Alberta as the "Prince of Wales", I marvelled at the grandeur of landscape stretching forth in all directions in a glorious spectacle. The sun shone not to advantage for satisfaction, yet all objects stood out in relief and details were readily distinguishable. The glaciers of far distant, rugged peaks glittered like diamonds when the sun shone through a patch of blue.

I seemed to be rooted to the spot on which I stood. The awe-inspiring sight acted as a powerful magnet within me as I scrutinized again, and again, the grand panorama which

exhibited the most picturesque and exceedingly wonderful subjects. As with a quick wrench from a nightmare, I shook myself out of the alluring, magical spell and moved away. But as I walked I was still held in the fascination of the wonders around me and my being was filled with extreme ecstasy. I then reached the flat below and stood on the ground where now is a dancing pavilion owned by Ernie Haug, my friend of the World War of 1914. Little did I dream then that the future would see a structure of this nature erected on that spot.

When I had engrossed myself to satiety on nature's most beautiful playground, I walked back to the tent.

Porcupine Jim had caught a dozen brook trout of the larger kind and four already fried to a delicious brownness. He said a hundred could have been caught at the pool, but he was satisfied with this many. After our feast we went down to the lake, at the mouth of Oil Creek, or Cameron Creek, threw together a raft and went out for a ride.

The next morning the atmosphere was clear and a conspicuously blue sky gave evidence of a glorious day. The sun came up with remarkable energy, the pressure of its rays playing upon the shriveling snow. We saddled our horses and in silence moved away.

The trail at this time was practically obliterated, but we could still see where the snow had melted away the sign of horse tracks on the muddy ground. We continued along to the mouth of Pass Creek. There, on the bank of the river, a log shack stood — a serene and peaceful scene. A dog came out towards us, barking vociferously and the noise brought out a man who scrutinized our outfits speculatively. Upon learning who we were and from what direction we came, he eased his posture and bade us unpack. We did this, with his aid, and placed our stuff under the shed.

He was a small man, agile in movement and quick eyed. A Stetson buckskin sombrero crowned his head — a bright red rose and a few green leaves painted on the under right-side of the brim. He wore a voyageur's red sash, long fringed, hanging loosely at his side; a broad brocaded silk muffler about his neck, cowboy style. He had long hair that fell gracefully in wavelets over his shoulders. A gray mustache, terminating in points and slightly curved upward. He had the appearance of a typical frontiersman.

"Boys," he said, pleasantly, and with the air of one who is generously hospitable, "come right in. You are welcome as the flowers in May!" smiling the while as he waved a hand toward the door.

We filed into his cosy sitting room — a beautiful room in its arrangement. The walls were profusely decorated with fancy buckskins hung gracefully by skilled hands; a few mounted game heads and nice feathers; portraits of beautiful women; pictures of ancient Greeks and Romans. In one corner stood a black mahogany case filled with books, including some costly editions. Extending clean across a ten-foot shelf nearby were magazines galore, set up edgewise. Several homemade chairs covered with costly skins were set around the room in just the right places. And the floor, what an agreeable sight. Covered with grizzly and black bear skins, mountain lion and white goat, all tanned and prepared with elaborate taste.

Singular was the character of this man, but in spite of singularity he opened wide his doors to all comers and treated them with hospitable care. I learned later that he had a host of friends who held him in the highest esteem.

Speaking of him now, after an acquaintance extending over many years, I want to tell you that he was a man with the exceptionally good qualities most appropriate in those of high birth. For the principles which he held he was exalted to high estate by his friends. He had a wonderful education, as a student his scholastic excellence had no parallel. Questions were frequently brought up by well-learned men on scientific problems, or the doctrines of Christian faith in the middle ages. Placidly, he would unravel the truth from each. He was versed as one dealing with philosophical or theological problems, in the spirit of Scholasticism. He had a wonderful vocabulary. Polite to his fellow men, and as a rule when in society affable to all.

His weak point, however, laid in the fact that he loved beautiful women. Ah! He was a queer fish! A great hunter; a good masher. A man who interspersed Latin quotations and classic oaths begotten of Oxford with the usual Western formula of embellished expressions.

To me that evening he was a prince, my judgment based from the first moment on the weight of his intellect. And I was right, for such he remained throughout the many years I knew him, until he died July, 1916.

As I sat upon a cushioned chair, admiring the many curiosities adorning the sitting room, I detected a fragrant odor of "kinnikinic" and noticed thin threads of blue smoke floating out of the partly opened door. Someone was smoking a pipe in the other room and that person was not a "white-skin." Later, when we went in for supper, I saw Nechemous for the first time. She was a Cree woman and lawfully married to Kootenai.

As I saw her then she was not corpulent, as she became so many years later. She was thin and slender, young and spry. An abundance of raven black hair was platted and hung to her waist. She was neither good looking nor graceful, but was a good cook and a dear companion to Kootenai.

She had prepared a mess of roasted canvas-back ducks and some muskrats. Kootenai was especially fond of the latter, and as I had previously eaten some with relish I did not now hesitate to take one. Ah, what a supper! I shall never forget that delicious meal. We ate like two hungry wolves until we were replete with satisfaction. Kootenai talked of sports and shotguns. At last, a broad smile illuminated his narrow, lined face. He said, "We on this earth must live to eat and eat to live. Let us retire now to the other room to smoke and chat."

He spread a cloth rug on the floor near the wall and bid us sit down beside him. Then he spoke. Beautiful phrases, pleasing expressions, flowed out smoothly in generous abundance. There was nothing so comparably pleasing as the sentiments uttered by this man of uncommon intelligence. Numerous adjectives he used to express the fineness of description. He never halted or stammered for want of correct words. His narrative proceeded with nicety.

Among the subjects related with an exceeding profusion of color was a brief discourse on his career as a young man in England, and we listened attentively and felt as if we were following him about to every place he went.

In the course of his story he became very animated when recounting his love affairs, which was done with much embellishment. His Hannah, his Molly and his Nancy! He worshipped them with an ardent passion that was altogether too mushy, almost to the point of fatuity. There was no choice to be made in the beauty of those damsels with whom he associated in many an escapade. They belonged to a society of extraordinary high class, and insomuch as he was possessed of a certain fascination himself no other young swain could make him eat a "mess of

oats", which means the taking of one's sweetheart away through the influence of her emotion. He was the lovelier man. At parties in the Midlands some sweethearts were conducted home by others than those who brought them, but never did anyone take his away — though on occasions he did a little stealing himself.

His intense love, which always enveloped his heart for one or more, led him into many courtships through the effect of his powerful, charming disposition. The beautiful countenances of those lovely creatures with tresses of gold and charming forms gave a complete harmony to the sense of sight and were described so minutely and vividly that I could see them prom- enading before my mind's eye.

Indeed, sentiments attributed generally only to deep feelings in a lover, were strongly manifested in Kootenai. And the lightly plaintive supplication associated with sincere tenderness, which is usually essential for true love in all the phases of lovemaking, had aroused again those harmonies in the man. The whole performance, as it were, stood out before me in which I saw him pleading for the hand of his lady-love. Ah, his Lord Eros, indeed!

He told of interesting things in Rangoon; of his enlistment as a scout in the United States Army and the charge against the Sioux at Wounded Knee; of the Riel Rebellion in which he was a member of the scouts under Middleton.

John George Brown, he said was his full name, and that he was of Irish extraction.

At the end of his long discourse, which took him until midnight, we had lunch and then retired to our beds.

The next morning we saddled our horses before his door, Porcupine Jim gave him two geese, a dozen mallards and eight large flat trout. He thanked us with a bow, and we returned him thanks for what he had done for us and for the use of his trapper shack.
